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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000754

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/06/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [KPAL](#) [XF](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: CONTROVERSY OVER MUHAMMAD CARICATURES CONTINUES IN FRANCE

REF: A. COPENHAGEN 147
[1](#)B. SIPRNET DAILY REPORT 2/2/2006 AND 2/3/2006

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: France has joined Denmark, but to a lesser degree, as a target of ire in Muslim countries following a French daily's February 1 publication of Danish-origin Muhammad caricatures (ref A), which have since appeared in other French media. Palestinian militants threw a grenade at the French cultural center in Gaza and threatened French and other European nationals, while French (and Danish) flags have been burned in Pakistan. The GoF response to the controversy has been to emphasize its commitment to freedom of expression and call for respect for religious convictions, while not offering an apology for publication of the images in France. Interior Minister Sarkozy has been the most uncompromising in defending the right of free expression, a sentiment widely shared by French media outlets and across the French political spectrum. While French Muslim organizations uniformly condemned the offending caricatures, they have also been united in appealing for calm. The GoF's official Muslim interlocutor, the CFCM, is contemplating a lawsuit over publication of the images in France, but we have seen no signs of unrest, with the few domestic protests so far remaining small and without incident. End Summary.

THREATS TO FRENCH INTERESTS IN GAZA

[1](#)2. (C) Following publication of Muslim prophet Muhammad caricatures by the French daily "France Soir" on February 1, the most serious overseas reactions so far appear concentrated in Gaza, where the Fatah-affiliated Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigades and "Abou Rich Brigades" publicly threatened Danish, French and Norwegian nationals, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) called for closure and destruction of the countries' diplomatic missions. Late February 2, a grenade was thrown at the French cultural center in Gaza, causing no injuries. MFA Palestinian affairs desk officer Mariam Diallo confirmed to us February 3 that the GoF had tightened security precautions in the Palestinian territories, while not formally withdrawing staff. She added that France would not withdraw its participants in the EU monitoring mission at Rafah, who were being advised to remain at their headquarters in Israel, just across the border. Diallo noted that Fatah militants and the PIJ were behind threats to French nationals; Hamas had thus far refrained from threatening French interests and, somewhat surprisingly, had made statements calling for protection of Palestinian Christians. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, there were press reports of French flags being burned in Pakistan, while Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria banned the newspaper "France Soir."

PROTECTING FREE SPEECH, WHILE RESPECTING RELIGIONS

13. (U) On the domestic front, the general GoF response has been to stress France's attachment to freedom of expression, while emphasizing the need to respect the religious convictions of others. The original MFA response to the controversy issued late February 1 declared, "France is a country of respect and tolerance attached to freedom of expression. It condemns all those who attack individuals in their beliefs or their convictions." When pressed on the issue of an apology, the MFA spokesman stressed that publication of the images was the sole responsibility of the newspaper in question, and that the GoF could not call into question freedom of the press in France after defending the principle throughout the world. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy took a more uncompromising stance in defense of press freedom, declaring February 2, "We must defend freedom of expression...And if I had to choose, I prefer the excess of caricature over the excess of censorship." FM Douste-Blazy took a more nuanced line in press remarks February 3, stating that while freedom of expression remained a founding principle of the French republic, it faced some limits under French law. At the same time, Douste-Blazy harshly criticized burnings of flags and other extremist responses, which he said gave credence to the caricaturists. French media coverage of the controversy has been widespread, with a number of dailies and networks showing the images both in the stated interest of informing the public and defending freedom of expression, and the left-leaning daily "Liberation" comparing the crisis to the fatwa against Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses. A number of newspapers and opposition politicians also criticized the firing of the France Soir editor (by the paper's Egyptian owner) as a further violation of freedom of expression.

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FRENCH MUSLIM REACTION

14. (C) Although religious leaders in the French Muslim community have been unified in their condemnation of the offending caricatures, they have also counseled calm and the use of "legal means" to express views on the issue. In a discussion with us February 3, Paris Grand Mosque imam supervisor Mohammed Louanoughi confirmed that the French Council of the French Muslim Faith (CFCM -- the umbrella group of Muslim organizations which serves as the GoF's official interlocutor on Muslim community religious issues) is contemplating a lawsuit in response to publication of the images, on the basis of French hate speech restrictions. Louanoughi added, however, that the Paris Mosque had rejected appeals from other groups to "take to the streets" and would instead seek to calm the situation and resolve the issue through dialogue. Similar restraint has been shown in public statements from the fundamentalist-leaning Union for Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF) which declared, "While understanding Muslims' anger, the UOIF invites them to react with serenity and calm and use legal means." Thus far, domestic protests of the caricatures have been small and peaceful, with press reporting a group of about 1,000 Muslim protesters assembling in Lyon after Friday prayers on February 3, and a similarly sized group gathering for a peaceful march in Paris February 5. According to press reports, the latter Paris protest did not have a police permit and was not affiliated with a particular organization, but took place without incident.

COMMENT

15. (C) While the caricatures have generated condemnation from the French Muslim community, this has not translated into widespread protests or the more feared resumption of unrest in predominantly Muslim (but not practicing) suburbs. Perhaps the biggest casualty for the GOF ultimately may be to

the French image in overseas Arab/Muslim public opinion. A local French/Tunisian think tanker specialized in Islam/Arab world issues concluded to us that the latest controversy, combined with the French ban of headscarves in public schools, would add to the impression in the Arab world that the French government "loves Arabs outside France, but hates them at home." The one consolation for the GoF may be that as more Western media outlets publish the offending images and overseas protests focus on Denmark, France gets lost in the crowd. End comment.

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Stapleton